

2015

# Research and Costume Design for "Our Town"

Alyssa R. Korol  
*University of Vermont*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Korol, Alyssa R., "Research and Costume Design for "Our Town"" (2015). *UVM Honors College Senior Theses*. 66.  
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses/66>

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM Honors College Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

Honors Thesis:

**Research and Costume Design**  
**For *Our Town***

**Alyssa Korol**  
University of Vermont 2015

## **Vision Statement**

*“As an artist (or listener or beholder) which “truth” do you prefer—that of the isolated occasion, or that which includes and resumes the innumerable? ...The theater is admirably fitted to tell both truths.” ~Thornton Wilder (1957)*

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder explores the relationship between the isolated, individual occasion, and the innumerable, repetitive patterns that emerge to create enduring truths. He considered scenery and costumes “bric-a-brac” that obstruct deeper meanings and realizations. This paradigm can create quite the challenge for a costume designer if the purpose of the production is to remain true to the playwright’s intentions. To confine this play to specific period costume would go against to the playwright’s vision of the show. The truths found in Wilder’s story encompass much more than one particular moment in time and place. However, the lives portrayed in *Our Town* are quite embedded in the reality of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire at the turn of the twentieth century. To completely detach the production from this social context would also be ungrounded. It was my goal to balance visual elements that conveyed that feeling of 1901 New Hampshire while honoring the playwright’s original intent.

## **Director’s Concept**

As in all productions, the costume designer’s vision is built upon the artistic vision of the leader of the production, i.e., the director. In this production, my director’s concept was to relate the text and material to contemporary life and its ongoing realities. She wanted a relatively “neutral” look that would create a “bubble”, an alternative world that was modern, but transcended beyond its original style, with only vague references to historical period.

I achieved that by making the following choices:

Costumes were used as a bridge between the setting of the play and modern times. Drawing inspiration from both current and period styles, I looked for specific connections between the eras: contemporary fashions with historical influences, or trends that have existed in both times. Period-inspired vests and boots combined with more contemporary jeans and skirts added an understated period component to a modern interpretation of the production. Besides the historical accents, I chose clothing that had subtle and classic style lines.

It was important to my director that we capture the simplicity of rural small-town life. She wanted the clothing to establish the mood without burdening the actors with heavy period costumes. This resulted in me choosing simple skirts, wool caps, a mix of solid and plaid fabrics, and aprons for Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb. For Emily's wedding, I gave her a simple white sundress worn with flat shoes with lace embellishments, and a small flower tucked in her hair. We wanted the clothes to look comfortable and lived in: well-worn, well-washed, and well-loved... and decidedly contemporary.

A specific color palette was used to unify the look on stage. Earth tone costume elements with sky blue and forest green accents, constructed in natural fabrics such as linen and cotton helped to connect the text's focus to the larger natural world. Since the set was sparse, a natural color palette of rich browns, dark greens, and light blues helped to establish the play's inherent connection to nature and a rustic environment. Although most of the clothes showed fairly even distribution of palette colors, I gravitated towards relating the two main families to each other through separate color themes of blues and browns.



As an example of my process, I will next discuss how I came to decide on choices I made in realizing the concept for the production in the context of specific characters and moments in the show.

One of the first characters I considered was Emily Webb. Her development through adolescence, love, and death is a key focus of the script. I saw Emily as belonging to both the Webb and Gibbs families, so I sought to connect her to both families' color schemes. Like the earthy browns worn by her parents, Emily's initial outfit included dark brown leggings and boots as well as a lighter beige skirt. The splash of blue from her collared shirt united her with George and *his* family, and gave her a livelier, more youthful appearance. Her skirt was a simple A-line design made from mostly sheer fabric that flowed gently as she moved. I also wanted her to feel passionate, so I chose to leave most of her hair down, with her bangs kept out of her eyes by a half French braid.

For George, the director and I wanted him to look playful, so I chose a pair of modern skinny-jeans that showed him as more youthful than the adult characters. Trendy boots added to his lighthearted, almost naive appearance while referencing period footwear. However, the play follows George's process of growing into an adult. Therefore, I connected him to the adult world by adding elements that mimicked his male role models: a collared shirt like his father, Dr. Gibbs, and a vest like his father-in-law, Mr. Webb. The dark brown color of his vest also bridged the gap between the separate color schemes of his and Emily's families.

I wanted George's sister, Rebecca, to come across as opinionated, so I chose a loud plaid shirt. As one of the boldest patterns in the show, it helped to lay the groundwork for her stubborn and strong personality. I also wanted her to seem clever, so I chose a pattern with bright cheerful colors. To make her feel younger than the other characters, I gave her low

pigtails for her long curly hair. Later in the show, when Rebecca is grown up and attending her sister-in-law's funeral, her hair was pulled back in a low bun and her bright shirt covered by a long dark coat, giving her a sense of muted maturity.

I wanted to connect Mrs. Soames to the other married women of the Grover's Corners (Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs) so I chose a similar silhouette for her costume. However, her character serves a very different role than the two mothers, so I separated her from them by putting her in a dress instead of a skirt and blouse. I chose to build Mrs. Soames's dress from a blue and white plaid fabric, which also contrasted with the simple solids of Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs. I wanted to present Mrs. Soames as a busybody, so I gave her a pleated style of dress. The resulting fuller skirt and overlapping layers of fabric had more movement onstage and laid the groundwork for the constant flitting motion of a busy neighborhood gossip.

For the Stage Manager, my director divided this character into three roles played by different people. We wanted them to appear related, yet distinct from each other, while still remaining part of the other characters' world. To make them feel trustworthy and honest I used combinations of somewhat dressier collared shirts, vests, and pants, which represent a tradition of reliability and leadership. Choosing clothing in varied neutral tones resulted in setting them apart as narrators without seeming foreign to the play's setting.

### **My Process**

Costuming is more than draping clothes on people: it involves interpersonal interaction and teamwork. Through my work as the costume designer for *Our Town*, I came to fully value the collaborative process; sharing inspiration often leads to innovations and is vital in theater. I enjoyed gathering data through preliminary research, discussing and exploring options with my

director, and seeing my sketches evolve through the design process. It was exciting to be able to further my director's vision of the play through my costuming experience—to tell her story through my medium, and have it become our story.

I also took part in the complex network of problem-solving that is involved in costuming a play—not only designing, but also deciding what pieces to build, pull from stock, or purchase, managing a budget, and learning how to use the construction team to best realize my designs. My first act as the costume designer of *Our Town* in the spring of 2014 was to read the script—many times. Using the character descriptions, given circumstances in the script, and my director's vision, I began researching and discussing my preliminary ideas and sketches with my director and the design team. This process eventually led to completed designs. After finalizing my designs with my director, I compiled a list of all eighty-nine costume pieces needed for the show. I then had to decide the best method to produce each item. That process included answering the following questions: Did we already have a similar item in stock? Did that pulled piece need any alterations? Was the item available to be purchased while staying within the budget? Could it be bought locally, or did it need to be ordered online? Or finally, was it a design central to the concept of the show that needed to be constructed specifically for the production?

For every piece that needed to be built for the show, the crew in the costume shop drafted an initial pattern and built a mock-up in muslin fabric. Next, the mock-up was adjusted on the actor during a fitting. After I approved the fit of each mock-up, it was then used to create a new pattern fit directly to that specific actor. While the mock-ups were being sewn and fit, I searched local fabric stores to choose swatches (fabric samples) for the designs we were building. I then showed and discussed these fabric options with my director. After gaining director approval, I

returned to the store to purchase the correct yardage of each fabric. The corrected patterns from the mock-ups were then used to cut the real fabric. Even after this step it could take up to two or three more fittings to ensure that each costume fit correctly and best served the design. When deciding the essential pieces I wanted to be built, I had to take into consideration the resources available to the UVM costume shop. Most members of the costume crew were students from the Fundamentals of Costume Design class and were fairly inexperienced stitchers. These students were overseen and instructed by the full-time UVM staff member and costume shop supervisor, Alan Mosser. All pieces I chose to have built needed to be able to be constructed in the limited time available and be ready to be onstage by the first dress rehearsal. At the end of this process I had designed twenty fully realized outfits, including fourteen individual pieces that were built by the costume shop. Overall, this project represents roughly twenty hours of shopping and fifty hours of fittings.

Having experienced the entire design process, I now have a better sense of what choices are going to work, what is going to read to an audience at a distance, and how much I still need to learn. This thesis project has been a vital part of my process of becoming a costume designer and has shown me that this is the career that I want to pursue further. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have designed for a UVM Mainstage production and all the support I received from the Department of Theater's faculty, staff, and students.

The following documents my design process through organizational paperwork, budget documentation, research, preliminary sketches, designs, and photos from the realized production.

## Costume Plot

Character	Act I Part i	Act I Part ii	Act I Part iii	Act II Part i	Act II Part ii	Act II Part iii	Act III Part i	Act III Part ii
Stage Manager (Brendan)	Striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, dress shoes, socks		SAME			SAME	SAME	SAME
Stage Manager (Grace)	White collared shirt, tan vest, brown pants, belt, dress shoes, socks	SAME		SAME			SAME	SAME
Stage Manager (Garrett)	Orange striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, dress shoes, socks		SAME		SAME		SAME	SAME
Professor Willard (Garrett)		Jacket, orange striped collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, belt, dress shoes, T-shirt, socks						
Dr. Gibbs (Ian)	Dark blue jacket, striped collared shirt, tan pants, belt, T-shirt, boots, socks.		SAME, but NO JACKET		SAME		SAME	SAME
Mrs. Gibbs (Julia)	Tan blouse, blue skirt, boots, hose, ADD apron during scene		SAME, but NO APRON	SAME, but ADD APRON		SAME (NO APRON)	SAME (NO APRON)	SAME (NO APRON)
George Gibbs (Aidan)	Teal collared shirt, brown vest, jeans, T-shirt, boots, socks	SAME	SAME	SAME	SAME	White shirt, gray vest, jeans, undershirt, boots, socks	BLACK COAT, teal collared shirt, vest, jeans, undershirt, boots, socks	SAME

Rebecca Gibbs (Katie)	T-shirt, plaid collared shirt, brown skirt, leggings boots, socks		SAME			SAME	SAME, ADD BLACK COAT	
Mr. Webb (John)		Brown plaid collared shirt, brown vest, tan pants, T-shirt, boots, socks	SAME	SAME		SAME	SAME, but ADD BLACK COAT	SAME but NO COAT
Mrs. Webb (Liz)	White blouse, brown skirt, slip, boots, hose, ADD apron during scene	SAME	SAME, but NO APRON	SAME, but ADD APRON		SAME NO APRON	SAME NO APRON ADD BLACK COAT	SAME but NO COAT and ADD APRON
Emily Webb (Ally)	Sleeve-less white shell, blue collared shirt, tan skirt, brown leggings boots, socks	SAME	SAME		SAME	White wedding dress, white shoes, white flower hairclip	SAME, but NO HAIR CLIP	SAME
Wally Webb (Ellis)	T-shirt, vest, jeans, baseball cap, boots, socks					SAME	SAME	SAME
Joe Crowell (Greg)	T-shirt, vest, jeans, cap, boots, socks					SAME	SAME	SAME
Howie Newsome (Jared)	Plaid collared shirt, suspenders, jeans, knit wool cap, boots, socks			SAME		SAME, but NO WOOL CAP, ADD BASEBALL CAP	SAME as ACT I with BLACK COAT	SAME as ACT I
Belligerent Man (Greg)		T-shirt, vest, jeans, boots, socks						
Woman in the Balcony (Caroline)		T-shirt, sweater vest, jeans, boots, socks						
Lady in a Box (Summer)		Shirt, jeans, T-shirt, boots, socks						

Simon Stimson (Avery)			Henley shirt, vest, tan pants, belt, boots, socks			SAME	SAME	SAME
Mrs. Soames (Erin)			Shirt-waist dress, sweater hose, shoes			SAME	SAME	SAME
Constable Warren (Conor)			Collared shirt, sweater vest, tan pants, belt, undershirt, boots, socks	SAME		SAME		SAME
Si Crowell (Summer)				Collared shirt, jeans, baseball cap, T-shirt, boots, socks				
Sam Craig (Caroline)							Black coat, T-shirt, sweater vest, jeans, boots, socks	
Joe Stoddard (Conor)							Black coat, collared shirt, sweater vest, tan pants, belt, undershirt, boots, socks	

## **List of Costume Pieces: 89 Total Pieces in the Show**

### **To Pull: 60 Pieces**

Leggings (Emily)  
Leggings (Rebecca)  
Collared shirt (Dr. Gibbs)  
Jacket (Dr. Gibbs)  
Henley shirt (Simon)  
Baseball cap (Wally)  
Baseball cap (Si Crowell)  
Baseball cap (Joe Crowell)  
Baseball cap (Howie Newsome)  
Newsboy hat (Joe Crowell)  
Belt (Wally)  
Belt (Stage Manager—Brendan)  
Belt (Stage Manager—Garrett)  
Belt (Constable Warren)  
Belt (Joe Crowell)  
Collared shirt—plaid (Mr. Webb)  
Blouse (Mrs. Webb)  
Skirt—Dark Blue (Mrs. Gibbs)  
Blouse (Mrs. Gibbs)  
Collared shirt, blue plaid,  $\frac{3}{4}$  sleeves (Rebecca)  
Skirt—brown (Rebecca)  
Collared shirt—checked (Howie)  
Collared shirt (Constable Warren)  
Sweater vest (Constable Warren)  
Sweater vest (Sam Craig)  
Sweater (Mrs. Soames)  
Collared shirt (Si Crowell)  
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Brendan)  
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Grace)  
Vest (Stage Manager—Grace)  
Collared shirt (Stage Manager—Garrett)  
Jacket (Professor Willard)  
Suspenders (Howie)  
T-shirt (Wally)  
T-shirt (George)  
T-shirt (Rebecca)  
T-shirt (Joe Crowell)  
T-shirt (Sam Craig)  
T-shirt (Dr. Gibbs)  
T-shirt (Mr. Webb)  
T-shirt (Constable Warren)  
T-shirt (Stage Manager—Brendan)  
T-shirt (Stage Manager—Garrett)  
Boots (Emily)  
Boots (George)  
Boots (Rebecca)  
Boots (Wally)  
Boots (Mrs. Gibbs)  
Boots (Dr. Gibbs)  
Dress Boots (Mr. Webb)  
Boots (Mrs. Webb)  
Boots (Constable Warren)  
Boots (Joe Crowell)  
Boots (Si Crowell)  
Boots (Sam Craig)  
Boots (Howie)  
Boots (Simon)  
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Brendan)  
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Grace)  
Dress Shoes (Stage Manager—Garrett)



**To Shop: 15 Pieces**

Pants—tan/khaki (Mr. Webb)  
Pants—tan/khaki (Dr. Gibbs)  
Pants—tan (Simon)  
Pants—tan (Constable Warren)  
Pants—tan (Stage Manager—Brendan)  
Pants—brown (Stage Manager—Grace)  
Pants—tan (Stage Manager—Garrett)  
Jeans (George)  
Jeans (Howie)  
Jeans (Sam Craig)  
Jeans (Wally)  
Jeans (Joe Crowell)  
Jeans (Si Crowell)  
Shoes (Mrs. Soames)  
Wedding shoes (Emily Webb)

**To Build: 14 pieces**

Sleeveless blouse (Emily)  
Collared shirt—Light blue (Emily)  
Sundress—White (Emily)  
Skirt—Brown (Emily)  
Skirt (Mrs. Webb)  
Collared shirtwaist dress (Mrs. Soames)  
Vest—buttons, no collar (Wally)  
Vest—pockets, buttons, no collar (Mr. Webb)  
Vest—open, no buttons, no collar, no pockets (George)  
Dress vest [for wedding] (George)  
Vest—open, pockets, no buttons, no collar (Simon)  
Vest—open, no buttons, no pockets, no collar (Joe Crowell)  
Vest—pockets, buttons, no collar (Stage Manager—Garrett)  
Vest—pockets, buttons, collar (Stage Manager—Brendan)

# Budget Sheet: Expenses for Our Town Costumes

BUDGET - OUR TOWN COSTUMES				
Date:	Store:	Item:	Price:	Amount left in Budget: 2,400.00
9/29/14	Jo-Ann	2 Fabric Samples	\$0.44	\$2,399.56
10/2/14	Jo-Ann	5 yrd white lining (Emily) 1 yrd Pilling soil solid (Garrett)	\$33.32	\$2,366.24
10/2/14	Rags and Riches	2 yrd Emily's Blue shirt Vests - Orange (Avery), Singlet (Tan) Mr. Webb (Ivy)	\$78.40	\$2,287.84
10/3/14	Jo-Ann	2 yrd pilling soil lining 3 Fabric samples	\$8.71	\$2,279.13
10/10/14	Kmart	4 pairs of tan/khaki pants (Tan, John, Avery, Grace)	\$60.96	\$2,218.17
10/16/14	JC Penney	Brown Pants (Grace)	\$19.99	\$2,198.18
10/17/14	DXL	Shoes (John)	\$89.00	\$2,109.18
10/17/14	Aeropostale	Plaid shirt (Kaitre) Tan Pants (Garrett or Connor)	\$25.49	\$2,083.69
10/19/14	Kmart	Shoes for Erin	\$19.99	\$2,063.70
10/19/14	American Eagle outfitters: ONLINE	Pants for Connor	\$40.02	\$2,023.68
10/20/14	Staples	costume plot copies	\$7.00	\$2,016.68
10/26/14	JC Penney	Belt for John Pants for Avery	\$53.99	\$1,962.69
10/26/14	Olympia sports	Shoelaces for Garrett	\$2.69	\$1,960.00
10/30/14	JC Penney	2 slips Belt for Tan	\$66.00	\$1,894.00
10/30/14	Jo-Ann	Ribbon for Mrs. Webb's apron straps	\$3.99	\$1,890.01
10/31/14	K-mart	RETURNED 2 pair of pants	+32.98	\$1,922.99
11/3/14	Rue 21	white shoe options for Emily	\$18.00	\$1,904.99
11/3/14	Shoe Department	white shoe options for Emily	\$29.96	\$1,875.03
11/14/14	JC Penney	RETURN - 2 slips belt for Tan	+66.00	\$1,941.03
11/14/14	Rue 21	RETURN - 3 white shoe options	+18.00	\$1,959.03
11/14/14	Shoe Department	RETURN - 1 white shoe option	+9.98	\$1,969.01
TOTAL SPENT: \$430.99				





## **Our Town** By Thornton Wilder

Photo Inspirations  
From Director



Ensemble Photo: In the Graveyard

# Emily Webb



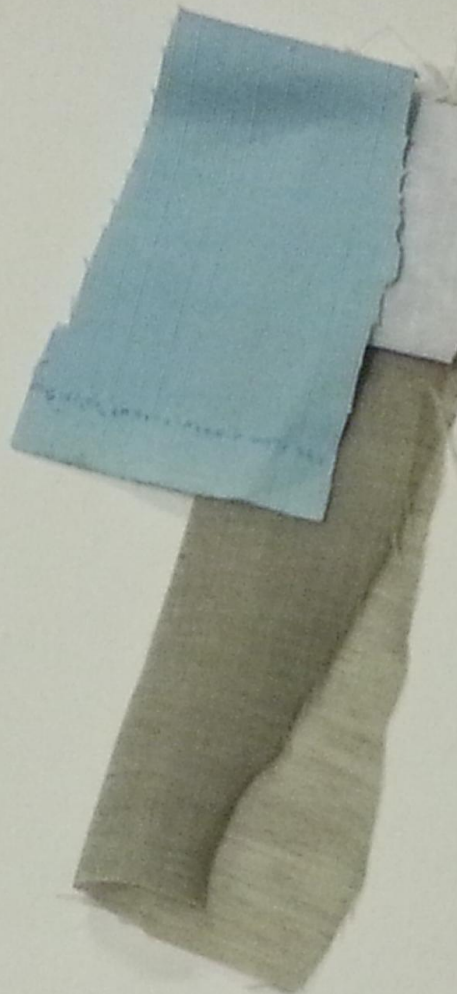




EMILY WEBB

# OUR TOWN

• ACT I



# EMILY WEBB





**Emily's Wedding Dress**





EMILY WEBB



# OUR TOWN

• ACTS II AND III



EMILY WEBB



George and Emily at their wedding

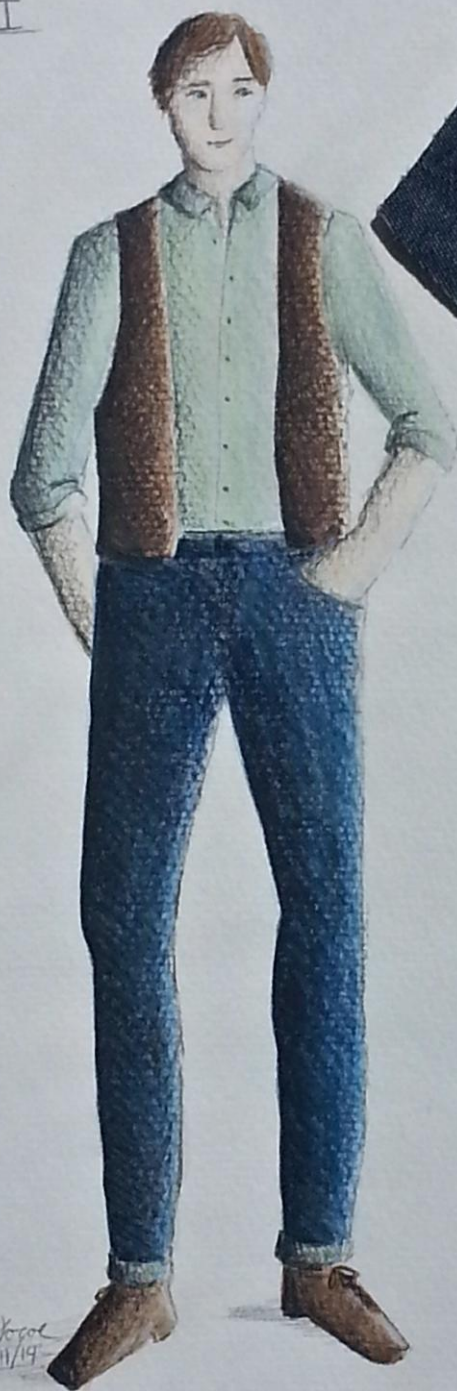


GEORGE GIBBS

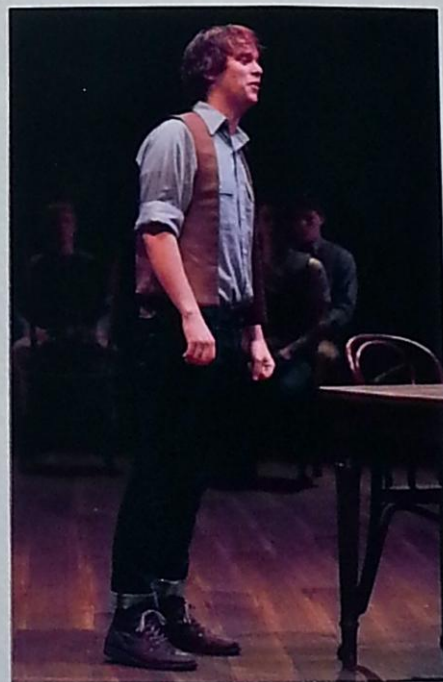


# OUR TOWN

•ACT I



Woroc  
11/19



## GEORGE GIBBS

George and Emily:







**Rebecca Gibbs**





REBECCA GIBBS



Rebecca and George Gibbs  
At the end of Act I





MRS. GIBBS

# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



MRS. GIBBS



Mrs. Soames, Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Gibbs  
After Choir Practice

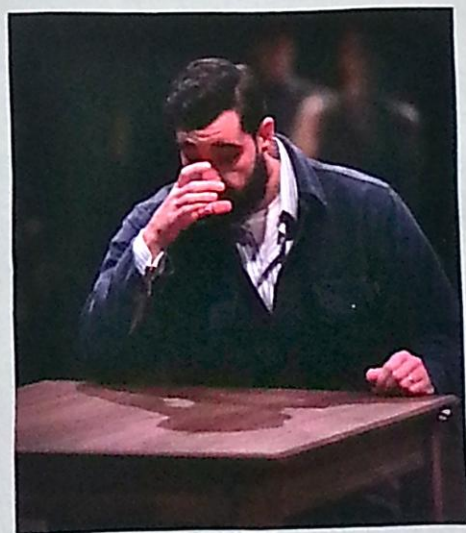
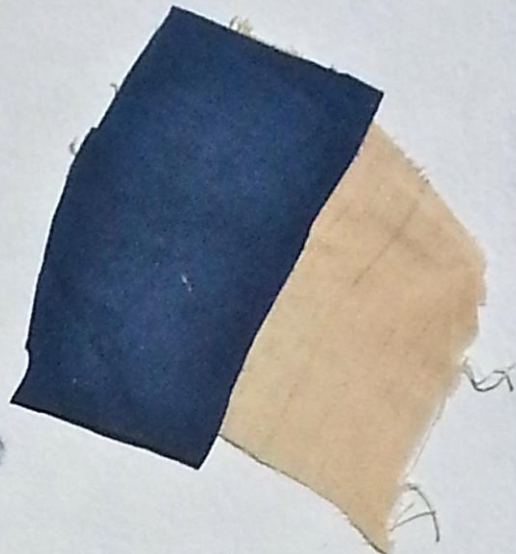




DR. GIBBS

# OUR TOWN

ACT I



MR. GIBBS





Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs



MR. WEBB



# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



11/19

## MR. WEBB





Emily and Mr. Webb



MRS. WEBB



# OUR TOWN

•ENTIRE SHOW



MRS. WEBB



Emily Webb, Mrs. Webb, and Wally Webb  
At Breakfast



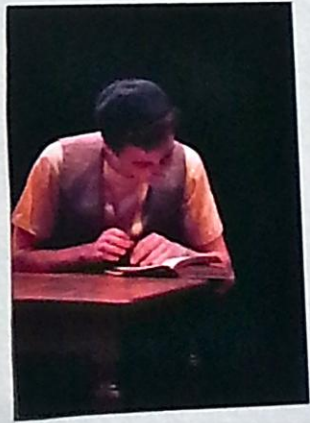


WALLY WEBB



OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



WALLY WEBB



**Mrs. Soames**





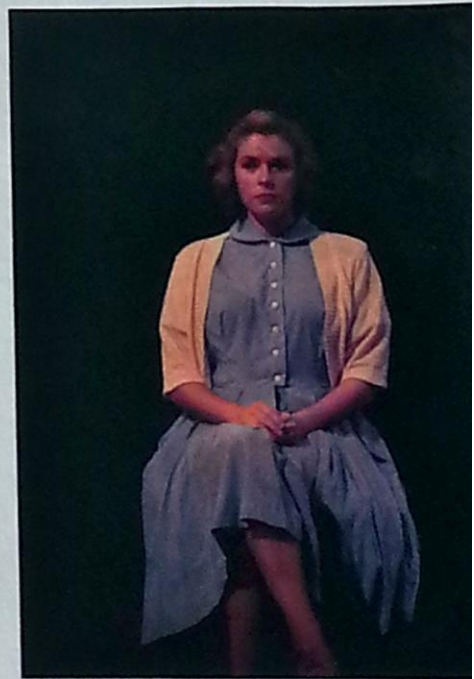


MRS. SOAMES



# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



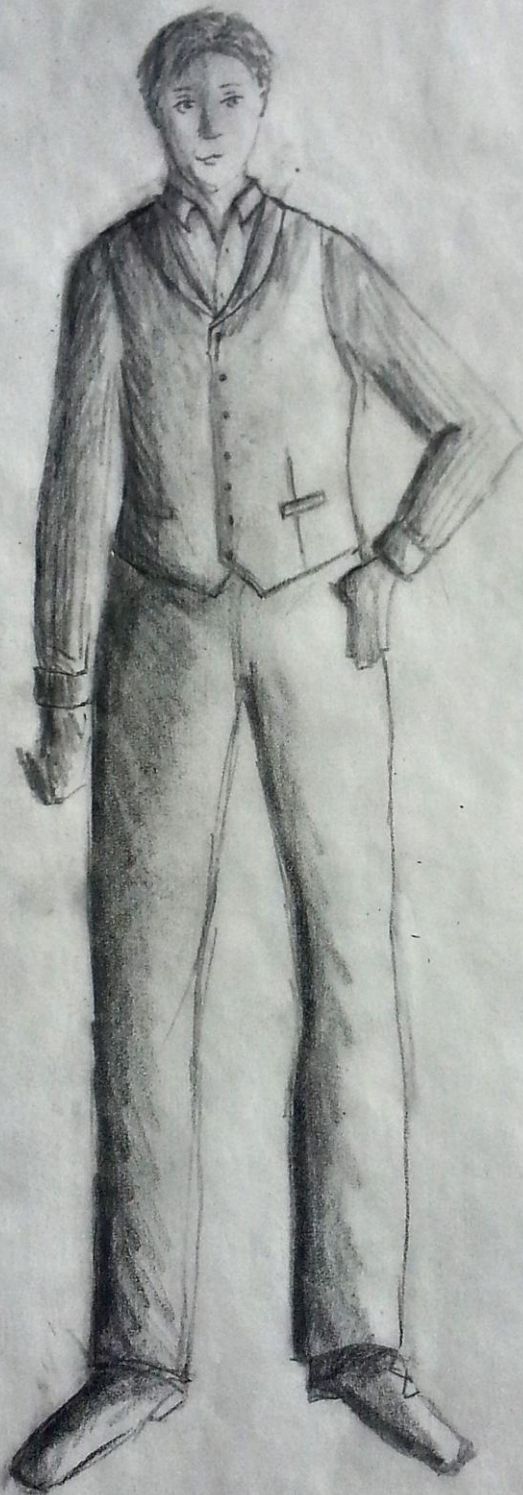
MRS. SOAMES



## Stage Manager

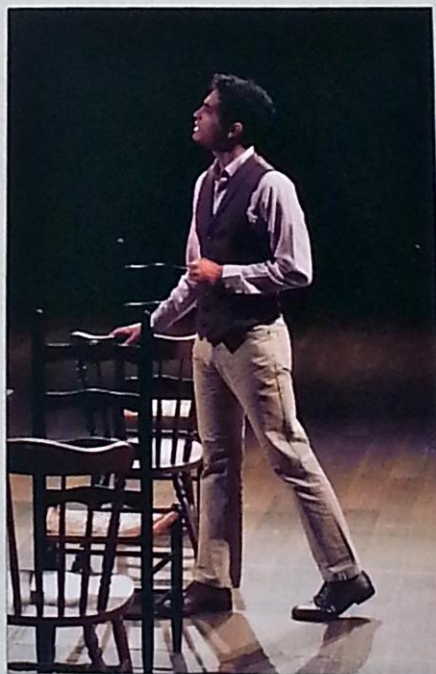






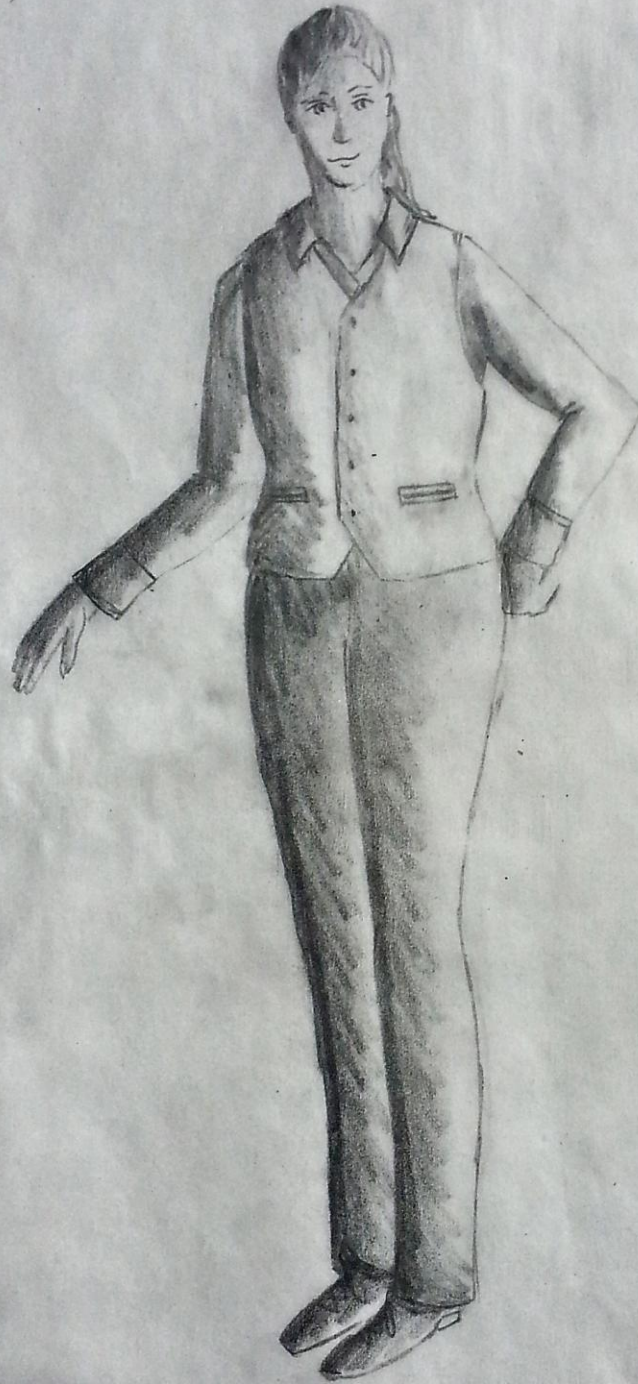
STAGE MANAGER

OUR TOWN  
ENTIRE SHOW



STAGE MANAGER





STAGE MANAGER

# OUR TOWN

• ENTIRE SHOW



## STAGE MANAGER





STAGE MANAGER

OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



STAGE MANAGER





A Stage Manager as Professor Willard



SIMON STIMSON

# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



SIMON STIMSON





HOWIE NEWSOME



# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



AKC  
11/14  
HOWIE NEWSOME



Howie Newsome

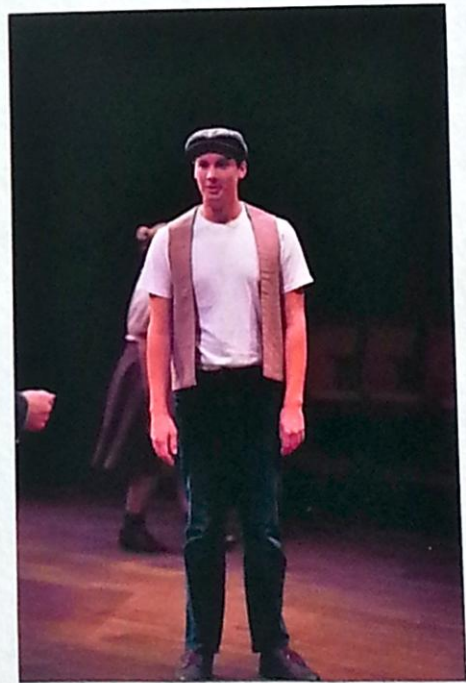


JOE CROWELL



# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



JOE CROWELL



SI CROWELL



# OUR TOWN

• ENTIRE SHOW

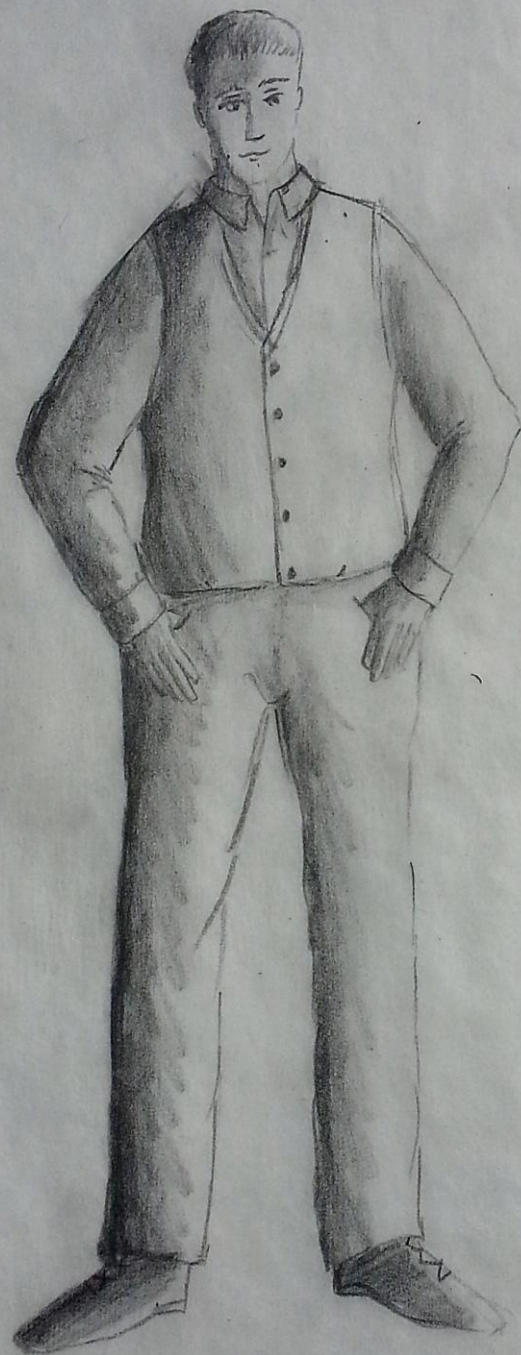


Nov  
11/14

## SI CROWELL







CONSTABLE WARREN

# OUR TOWN

• ENTIRE SHOW



CONSTABLE WARREN





SAM CRAIG



# OUR TOWN

ENTIRE SHOW



SAM CRAIG

## Ensemble Inspirations



## Ensemble Footwear Inspirations



Ensemble Photos:



Choir Practice





In the Graveyard: Ensemble Photo

## Bibliography:

- Barton, Lucy. *Historic Costume for the Stage*. USA: 1935; renewal, 1965. Print.
- Blum, Stella. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar 1867-1898*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974. Print.
- Fukai, Akiko, Tamami Suoh, Miki Iwagami, Reiko Koga, and Rii Nie. *Fashion: A History from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. "The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute". TASCHEN, 2006. Print.
- "Godey's Lady's Book" *American Ladies' Magazine*. Vol 22. Philadelphia, PA: L. A. Godey & Co., 1840-1892.
- Hodon, Sara. "Godey's Lady's Book." *History Magazine* 11.1 (2009): 4-5. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.
- Homer, Winslow. "Snap the Whip". 1872. Painting.
- Mitchell CO., Jno. J. *Men's Fashion Illustrations from the Turn of the Century*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1990. Print.
- "Popular Items for Line Skirts". *Etsy, Inc.* 2015. Online.  
<[https://www.etsy.com/market/linen\\_skirts](https://www.etsy.com/market/linen_skirts)>
- Shannon, Helen and Hazel Ulseth. *Bridal Fashions: Victorian Era*. Grantsville, MD: Hobby House Press, Inc., 1986. Print.
- "The Great Price Maker". *The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogue*. Chicago, IL: Castle Books, 1902. Print.
- "The Great Price Maker". *The Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogue*. Chicago, IL: Castle Books, 1906. Print.
- Tortora, Phyllis G., and Keith Eubank. *Survey of Historic Costume*. 5th ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2009. Print.
- Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. HarperCollins, 2003; premiered 1938. Print.
- Wilder, Thornton. *Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and the Matchmaker*. HarperCollins, 2007; orig. published 1957. Print.